

The Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League and the formation of a new movie viewer movement

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The year 1968 has become a powerful symbol for the raised hope for political, social and cultural change. Japan is no exception, although in Japan 1968 may not be as pregnant with political meaning as in Europe, for there were other years of even greater significance. Still, 1968 has become a frequently invoked metaphor for the forces that politically, socially and culturally reshaped Japan.

From the vantage point of Japanese film history, 1968 was indeed an outstanding year. The start of the Art Theatre Guild (ATG) production system gave the independent feature film production a boost, the establishment of the Japan Underground Center and the Japan Filmmakers' Cooperative was a buoyant force for experimental films, and the founding of Ogawa Production and the Nihon Documentarist Union (NDU) heralded new ways in the field of documentary film as well. Moreover, the launch of new film magazines such as *Kikan Firumu* ("Quarterly Film"), *Gankō sensen* ("Sight Line") and *Cinema '69* broke new ground in film criticism. The arguably most significant event of 1968, however, which triggered a widespread protest movement that ultimately changed Japanese cinema most decidedly, was the lay-off of director Suzuki Seijun by the Nikkatsu studio.

1: Suzuki's dismissal

On April 25, 1968, Suzuki Seijun got a phone call from the secretary of the executive director of the Nikkatsu film studio Murakami Satoshi letting him know that he will not get paid his salary for April. In a nutshell: Suzuki had been sacked.

To Suzuki the bad news came rather as a surprise. Suzuki has been working as director exclusively contracted to Nikkatsu since March 1, 1957, and the one-year fixed-term contract was annually renewed. On February 24, a week

before the contract terminated and following common practice, he had been verbally notified by Murakami that his contract will be prolonged. The paperwork was usually done later and Suzuki had properly got his salary for March. He was in the middle of shooting the episode "*Aru kettō*" (A Fight) for the TV-series *Aisai-kun konban wa* (TBS) produced by Nikkatsu when he learned that he was fired by order of Nikkatsu president Hori Kyūsaku.

The day after the ill-fated phone-call two friends of Suzuki went to meet Hori and find out about the reasons for the sudden sacking. Hori basically told them this: Suzuki makes films that nobody understands. Suzuki has been warned, but he won't listen. Suzuki's films are always in the red and are not profitable. Suzuki should stop making films. He should rather sell noodles (Ueno 1986: 216).

It is true that Suzuki's films never were cash cows for the studio, but then again this was not surprising, because Suzuki was mostly assigned to B-movies, that is to say to the supplementary films of the prevailing double bill system. Those were not the films featuring the big stars and standing in the limelight of media attention. For a decade Suzuki had faithfully fulfilled what the studio expected him to do and directed between three and six films a year. In the 1950s Nikkatsu had flourished mostly thanks to its strong rooster of male stars and the appeal of their films for a young demographic, but the rapidly decreasing number of movie attendance in the 1960s plunged the studio into financial crisis and forced it to cut down its production. Suzuki was affected as well, and in 1967 he was able to make only one film, *Koroshi no rakuin* (Branded to Kill), which amplified the rift between Suzuki and studio boss Hori Kyūsaku. Hori was never particularly fond of Suzuki's films, which over time increasingly

diverted from orthodox filmmaking conventions by disregarding narrative logic in favor of stylistic excess. *Koroshi no rakuin* in particular left Hori, who regarded the film as incomprehensible, infuriated. His wrath, which ultimately led to Suzuki's lay-off, was not totally unreasonable, but in the end also not quite justified, because as a matter of fact Suzuki had helped the studio out of a fix. Nikkatsu was in urgent need of a supplementary film for Nishimura Shōgorō's *Hana o kuu mushi* (Insect That Eats Flowers) and the planning department asked Suzuki to pinch-hit. The action movie Suzuki was preparing at this point was regarded to not really match Nishimura's erotic film for a double bill, so he came up with a new scenario. The managing director commented that he had to read the screenplay twice to understand it, but he approved it anyway, because the release date, which has already been fixed, was drawing near. It stands to reason that Suzuki was bewildered that the film he had made to help his studio ultimately resulted in his being fired.

As a matter of fact, Suzuki was not the only director who was sacked by the Nikkatsu studio. The strained financial situation of the Nikkatsu studio resulted in a number of laid off directors and staff. What distinguished the case of Suzuki, however, was that this was not an ordinary case of labor conflict, but there was more at stake.

2: Enter the Cineclub Study Group

Since the 1950s film clubs, film circles and other gatherings of cinéphiles had played an important role enriching Japanese film culture by proactively organizing film screenings apart from the commercial film exhibition routes. One of these initiatives was the Cineclub Study Group, founded in 1966 and headed by Kawakita Kazuko, the daughter of Kawakita Nagamasa and his wife Kashiko, two of the key figures for the import of foreign movies to Japan.

In February 1968 the Cineclub Study Group had started negotiating with Nikkatsu about a comprehensive retrospective of Suzuki Seijun's films, which was scheduled to be shown at the Nikkei Hall in Ōtemachi from May 10 to July 26. The details were settled and the program and flyers already distributed when on April 26, the day after Suzuki got sacked, Nikkatsu cancelled the rental agreement. In a meeting the following day Kawakita Kazuko tried to change the mind of

Nikkatsu president Hori, but to no avail. On this occasion Hori declared: "The movies of Suzuki are incomprehensible. Therefore they are bad movies. To show these films are a shame for Nikkatsu. Nikkatsu cannot allow the prevalence of the image that Nikkatsu makes movies that only certain people can understand. Nikkatsu has fired Suzuki as of April 25. Any screening of Suzuki's films, be it in cinemas or in Cineclub programs, will be forbidden for the time being." (Ueno 1986:217). To put it simply: Hori did not only fired Suzuki, he also shelved all of his films.

On April 30 Suzuki reported the case to the Directors Guild of Japan, which summoned a special council meeting. Gosho Heinosuke, the Directors Guild president, met with Hori Kyūsaku on May 2 and filed the following protest note (Kakita 1992: 144):

1. The unilateral cancellation of (Suzuki's) contract is an aggressive act, which ignores existing rules. We cannot tolerate such pre-modern conduct.
2. The refusal of renting films is a violation of the freedom of expression guaranteed by the constitution. Even if the films in question are products owned by the company, they are at the same time a cultural property. Therefore, in spite of the fact that it is the company's social obligation to answer screening requests that have properly been filed, the current sanction is an improper act and it regards cultural products as merely private property.

In a protest meeting organized by the Cineclub Study Group on May 10, attended by some 200 participants, an open letter was issued in protest against Nikkatsu.

Suzuki himself, on the other hand, after a futile meeting with studio executive Murakami Satoru on May 20 lodged a requisition in which he requested proof of president Hori's claims. When the requisition was turned down Suzuki on June 7 filed a lawsuit against Nikkatsu at the Tōkyō District Court.

Five days later, on June 12, the Cineclub Study Group organized a protest rally in front of Nikkatsu's headquarter in Hibiya. Aside from the members of the Cineclub Study Group the rally was joined by fellow film directors such as Ōshima Nagisa, Shinoda Masahiro, Fujita Toshiya and Adachi Masao, film critics such as Satō Jūshin and Osabe Hideo, writers, actors, film staff, cinéphiles

as well as leftist student activists. The demonstration eventually gave rise to the formation of the so-called Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League (Suzuki Seijun Mondai Kyōtō Kaigi), which was officially inaugurated on July 13.

3: The Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League

The formation of the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League was in accordance with the spirit of the time, when All-Campus Joint Struggle Leagues (*zenkyōtō*) were formed at universities up and down the whole country. They were at the center of the student protest movement and gave the whole generation – the Zenkyōtō generation – its name.

Headed by scriptwriter Sasaki Mamoru and film critic Matsuda Masao the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League was joint by film organizations such as the Directors Guild of Japan, the Japan Society of Cinematographers, the Japan Film Actors Association, the Japan Film Pen Club, the Nikkatsu Directors Club and the All Japan Student Movie Alliance, independent production companies such as Sōzōsha (Ōshima Nagisa), Hyōgensha (Shinoda Masahiro), Wakamatsu Production (Wakamatsu Kōji), Kuroki Production (Kuroki Kazuo) and Ogawa Production (Ogawa Shinsuke), Cineclub organizations such as the Cineclub Study Group, the Suginami Cineclub, the Sōgetsu Cineclub and the Tokyo Student Film Liga, as well as some 350 individuals.

At the first assembly of the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League on July 13 a manifest was adopted which reads as follows (Kawarabata 1971:470):

We, who on July 13, 1968, have formed the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League, from the standpoint of filmmaker organizations, movie audience organizations and individuals declare the following:

1. We resolutely fight the act of violence of the Nikkatsu studio, who unilaterally fired direc-

tor Suzuki Seijun and keeps all of his works locked up.

2. We hold the belief that the Suzuki Seijun problem is more than just the question of one single director against one film studio. We confirm that this is a fight against an authoritarian system, which continuously infringes the copyrights of authors and their right to live, suppresses creative movements and bluntly ignores and insults the whole audience.
3. We are aware that this fight will decide the future of Japanese cinema and we are determined to take the most radical line of battle in this fight.
4. We will definitely win.

The formation of the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League was groundbreaking because it was the first large-scale movement in Japan, which took the position of the movie audience and challenged the primacy of the major film studios. It is also a prime example of the renegotiation of the relationship between the studios, the filmmakers and the audience. The power of the studios was in

decline whereas the audience, shrinking in absolute number, but therefore all the more precious for the film producers, began to take the center stage.

The question at stake now was by no means the Suzuki Seijun problem alone. This can be seen in the topics of the panel discussions organized by the Joint Struggle League: the first, held on

September 21 at the Yotsuya Kōkaidō Hall, was entitled “The present situation and criticism of Japanese cinema” (*Nihon eiga no genjō to hihan*), the second, held on December 14, was dedicated to the “Kokugakin Eikan incident”, in which police had seized film footage from members of the Kokugakuin University Film Club, which they had taken during the riots in Shinjuku on Anti-War day (October 21). In early 1969 the Joint Struggle League continued to organize a series of symposia

exploring the “Prospects for the reform of Japanese cinema” (*Nihon eiga henkaku e no tenbō*).

The Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League also achieved an immediate success: Nikkatsu departed from its uncompromising attitude and began renting out films of Suzuki to repertory cinemas again. For the most part, however, this was a strategic move of Nikkatsu to improve its position in the upcoming trial. The support of Suzuki’s trial against Nikkatsu also became the major field of activity for the Joint Struggle League.

4: The Trial

On June 7 Suzuki filed a lawsuit against Nikkatsu demanding a public apology for Hori Kyūsaku’s libelous remarks and a compensation payment of 7.38 million Yen. The trial began on July 19, 1968, and ended with a settlement reached on December 24, 1971. During the three and a half years that the trial lasted Nikkatsu underwent a quite drastic change. The continuing decline in movie-attendance and the resulting decline in revenues paired with bad investments in real estate and other none-film related businesses further exacerbated the already murky financial situation of the studio, which was forced to sell its headquarter as well as some of its cinemas. The common distribution company with the also faltering Daiei studio proofed unsuccessful and was only short-lived. To avoid an impending bankruptcy, the studio in autumn 1971 changed its production completely and switched to the production of sexploitation films, which were launched under the banner of “Nikkatsu Roman Porno”. Before that, in June 1971, Hori Kyūsaku had retired as president of Nikkatsu.

In March 1971 Suzuki and Nikkatsu had started negotiating a settlement. As is common practice in Japan the settlement negotiations were recommended and initiated by the judge of the trial in order to give both sides the chance to keep their face. The settlement reached on 24 December 1971 stipulated the following (Ueno 1986: 227):

1. Nikkatsu pays Suzuki a compensation payment of 1 Million Yen,
2. Nikkatsu expresses its regret for the allegations of Nikkatsu president Hori Kyūsaku with regard to Suzuki’s dismissal,
3. Nikkatsu donates a print each of Suzuki’s films *Kenka erejii* (Fighting Elegy) and

Koroshi no rakuin (Branded to Kill) to the National Filmcenter.

Even though the trial ended with a settlement and not a verdict Suzuki clearly came out as the winner of the dispute. The last point, the donation of two film prints of Suzuki’s films to the National Filmcenter, evidently was also a concession to the movie audience movement as represented by the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League. The fact that he was seen as the “winner” in the legal battle with Nikkatsu was but a small comfort for Suzuki, however. After being fired from Nikkatsu Suzuki was coerced into a long hiatus and it was not until 1977 that he was able to direct his next film. He kept afloat by directing a few commercials for TV as well as by writing essays, but the decade between 1968 and 1977 is a clear blank in Suzuki’s career.

It was in this period, however, that Suzuki’s fame continuously grew – in Japan as well as overseas. If nothing else, this was the result of the endeavors of the cinéphiles who were the driving force behind the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League. The Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League deserves credit for the emancipation of Japanese moviegoers and cinéphiles as well as for the redefinition of the relationship between producers, filmmakers, exhibitors and the audience.

The end of Suzuki’s trial coincided with the end of the Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle League. Although never officially disbanded, in spring 1971 their activities practically came to a halt. Its spirit of empowering movie audiences, however, lived on in the independent film movements that gained momentum in the 1970s and early 1980s.

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